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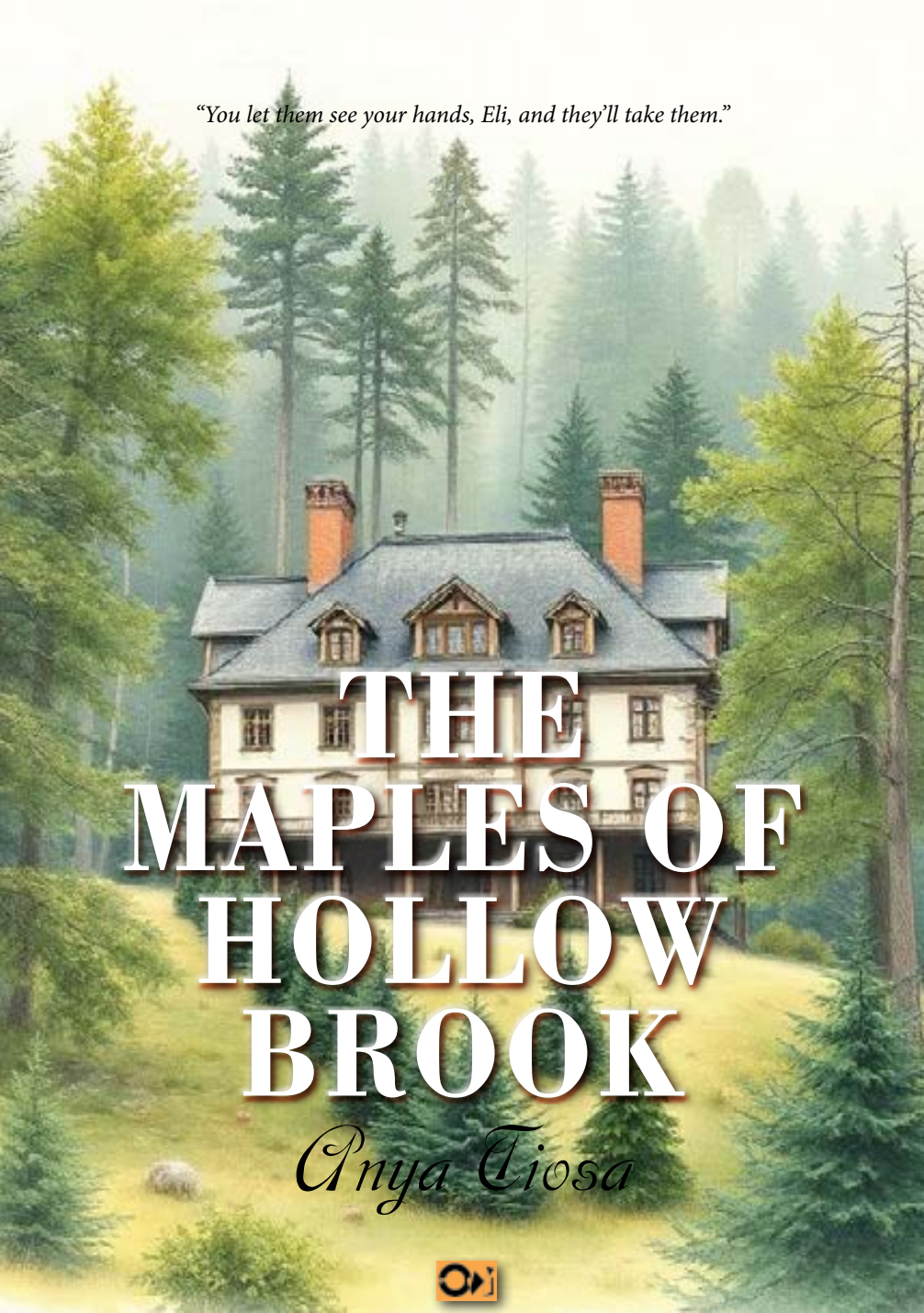

THE MAPLES OF HOLLOW BROOK

Anya Tiosa

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The maples of Hollow Brook

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It was a cold January evening when Eli Tannen walked down the worn-out dirt road that led to the edge of the Hollow Brook forest, where the maples stood in their quiet, eternal rows. His boots crunched against the frost as the wind cut through his threadbare coat. He hadn't been down this path in over a year, not since his father passed and left him the family business. And even then, Eli had never been keen on leaving the warmth of the stove or the comforting hum of his maple syrup boiling away in the barn.

But the rumours had begun again. Worse this time. And his father's old warnings rang in his ears.

"You let them see your hands, Eli, and they'll take them."

It was exactly what they wanted, to know how the Tannens made the syrup. There was no recipe written down anywhere, no secrets carved in stone or whispered into the night. It was just something passed down, year after year, by Eli's father, then by his grandfather. A touch of this, a pinch of that. A little luck, too, though his father was never keen to admit that.

Eli pulled his collar tighter as he reached the old sugar shack at the edge of the forest. It was barely more than a shack now, the wood weathered, the windows cracked, and the roof sagging under the weight of years and storms. He knew that people in town had begun to talk again, whispering about his syrup, how it was richer than any they'd tasted, more vibrant, almost magical. They said it had something to do with his hands, or the way the sap boiled, or that there was some sort of witchcraft to it.

He didn't believe it, but others in town did. And that was dangerous.

As he stepped inside, the warm, syrup-scented air hit him like a wave. His brother, Nathan, stood by the stove, stirring a pot of syrup with slow, deliberate

motions. Eli hated the way his brother looked at him, the way Nathan always tried to hold onto things that weren't his. He was always asking Eli about the recipe, always hinting at how the syrup could make them rich if only they shared it with the right people.

"Eli, you out there?" Nathan called without looking up.

"Yeah," Eli answered, stepping further into the room, brushing the snow off his shoulders.

"You hear the news?" Nathan turned around, a grin on his face that didn't reach his eyes. "Maggie Reynolds is asking around again. Wants to know if you'd be willing to sell the recipe."

"I already told her no," Eli replied, his voice low and steady. He wasn't about to let Nathan get under his skin. Not this time.

Nathan shrugged. "She's not the only one, Eli. You know that, right? More folks are talking. They want what we've got. They'll keep pushing you."

Eli clenched his fists. His father had always warned him about these things, about people who'd see what you had and try to take it. But it wasn't just about the syrup, was it? No, it was something deeper, something more sinister. It was about their family's legacy, something intangible but fierce. Eli could feel it in his bones, could feel the weight of it every time Nathan looked at him like he was holding something that didn't belong to him.

"You tell them I'm not selling," Eli said, standing straight. "Not now. Not ever."

Nathan's face tightened, the muscles in his jaw working. "You're making a mistake. You've always been stubborn, Eli. Always thinking you know best. Well, things are changing. People are tired of waiting. You could have it all, Eli. Just think about it."

Eli didn't answer. Instead, he walked over to the stove, took the ladle, and dipped it into the pot of syrup. He held it up to the light, watching the golden liquid catch the glow from the stove's flame.

Nathan's voice came again, quieter this time. "They're talking about witchcraft, Eli. They say your syrup's not just sweet, it's… special. People have been disappearing, and they say it's because of the magic in the trees, in your syrup. People are afraid."

Eli didn't flinch. He had heard the stories before. Townsfolk with too much time on their hands and too much imagination to spare. They loved to weave these tales when they had nothing better to do. But it wasn't just talk. It was fear, and fear could do terrible things.

"What do you mean, disappearing?" Eli asked, keeping his voice even. He knew Nathan would feed him something, but he had to ask anyway.

Nathan shifted uncomfortably. "First it was just a couple of folks who left the town. Old Joe at the general store, now it's Betty from the mill. They're not coming back. People think it's because of the syrup, Eli. They think you've cursed it, cursed the land."

Eli stared at the syrup, lost in thought. He had spent so many years trying to perfect the boil, to make it

the best, the richest, and now people were attributing things to it that had nothing to do with the syrup itself. Or did they? His father had always said the trees had a spirit of their own, but Eli had never believed it, not until now.

"I've worked this farm all my life," Eli finally said, his voice soft but steady. "My father did. And his father before him. This syrup..." he paused, looking at Nathan, "it's not just a recipe. It's part of us. It's who we are. If they want to take it, they'll have to go through me."

Nathan smirked, though there was a bitterness in his eyes. "Is that a threat, Eli? You're really willing to fight over this?"

"I'm not fighting over anything. I'm protecting what's mine."

There was silence between them for a moment. The only sound was the faint crackle of the fire in the stove and the steady rhythm of the syrup being stirred.

Suddenly, there was a loud knock at the door. Eli's heart skipped a beat. He hadn't expected company this late.

"Who's that?" Nathan asked, his eyes narrowing.

"I don't know," Eli said, but something about the knock felt wrong.

He stepped toward the door and opened it cautiously. Outside stood two men from town, their faces shadowed in the dim light.

"Evening, Eli," the taller man said, his voice steady but carrying a hint of something else, something Eli couldn't quite place. "We need to talk."

"What about?" Eli asked, his hand tightening around the doorframe.

"About your syrup," the man said.

Eli's stomach sank. He stepped back, out of the way, as the men entered without invitation. They looked

around the shack, their eyes scanning everything with a kind of nervous intensity.

"We hear you've been turning people away," the second man said, his voice lower, his eyes darting to Nathan.

"I've made myself clear," Eli said, his tone unwavering. "I'm not selling."

The taller man stepped forward. "We think you're hiding something, Eli. Something more than just syrup. Something… unnatural. People are scared."

Eli's blood ran cold. He could see where this was going. People were whispering that the syrup was cursed, that it had the power to make people disappear, to draw the wrong kind of attention.

"Get out of my house," Eli said, his voice suddenly sharp, no longer hiding the threat.

The two men exchanged a glance, but neither made a move.

"You don't understand, Eli," the taller man continued, his voice quiet but forceful. "We're here to help you. If you just tell us what you're hiding, we can keep it from spreading."

Eli stood tall, his heart pounding in his chest. "I'm not hiding anything. I've worked this land, this syrup, my whole life. This is my family's legacy."

The men looked at each other, their faces tight. Eli could see the doubt creeping in, the hesitation. And then, just like that, they turned and left without another word.

As they disappeared into the night, Eli closed the door and leaned against it, the weight of what had just happened pressing down on him.

"What now?" Nathan asked, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Eli shook his head. "Now, we wait."

But the shadows of the forest felt closer now. The rumours, the fear, the stories, Eli knew it wouldn't be long before things escalated. The syrup might have been his family's legacy, but it was also a burden. And sooner or later, someone would come for it.

The End

The maples of Hollow Brook

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"You let them see your hands, Eli, and they'll take them."

Anya Tiosa. By day, she wrangles the minds of unsuspecting pre-teens, armed only with patience (mostly) and a healthy supply of caffeine. By night, she transforms into a secret agent of the mundane, infiltrating the lives of ordinary folks and documenting their hilarious, heartbreaking, and utterly bizarre quirks.

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